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NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

DECEMBER 1969

VOLUME V

NO. 12

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Photo by R. Dewire

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DECEMBER

The Month Of Winter Finches

December is the month of the winter finches. When the cone and berry crop in northern New England and Canada is not good, birds are forced to move further South in search of food. These conditions result in the arrival of the "winter finches" in Connecticut. There are six of these to look for.

Photo by R. Dewire

The most familiar of this group is the Evening Grosbeak. Eagerly awaited each year by people with feeding stations, they may descend on feeders in flocks of 100 or more. The males look almost tropical with their huge bills, areas of brilliant yellow, and large white wing patches. They may arrive as early as October and stay to April.



The Pine Grosbeak is the size of the Evening Grosbeak but the male is a deep pink in color with two white wing bars. The female is dull yellow. These birds rarely come to feeders, but prefer to visit berry and apple shrubs and trees.

The two small winter finches are the Pine Siskin and the Redpoll. They are the size and shape of the Goldfinch. The siskin is a heavily streaked brown bird that looks like a small female Purple Finch. They have traces of yellow on the wings and tail which is most noticeable when they fly. The Redpoll is similar to the

Siskin but lacks the streaks on the chest. On the forehead is a deep red spot. In addition, the male's chest is a light pink. Both birds will visit feeders eating both the sunflower and mix seed. The Siskins arrive as early as late October, but the Redpolls do not come until December. Both will stay until April.



The last and most difficult to find of the winter finches are the two Crossbills. These birds feed on the cones of various evergreens. Their bills are curiously crossed, which aids them in taking the seeds out of the cones. The two species are the Red Crossbill, in which the male is a deep brick red with dark wings, and the White-winged Crossbill in which the male is a deep pink with two white wing bars. The females are similarly dull yellow but the presence or absence of white wing bars separates them. Pine groves are the places to look for these birds as they rarely visit feeders.

DECEMBER'S CALENDAR

December is the month of Christmas trees and mistletoe.

Dec. 5 ... Chanukah Begins

Dec. 2 - 12 ... The earliest sunsets of the year - 4:12 P.M.

Dec. 8 ... Last year's first heavy freeze.

Dec. 8 ... The first Redpolls of the year arrive from the North.

Dec. 14 ... Canvasbacks arrive to spend the winter in our rivers.

Dec. 17 - 26 ... The shortest days of the year - nine hours and six minutes long.

Dec. 21 ... Winter begins at 7:44 P.M.

Dec. 23 ... The full Cold Moon rises.

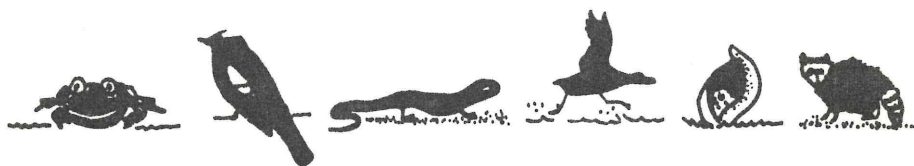
Dec. 25 ... Christmas Day

Dec. 27 ... Feeders report 500 blue Jays, 413 Chickadees and 123 Cardinals on the New London Christmas Count.

Dec. 30 ... Bald Eagles are wintering on the Connecticut River.

Dec. 30 - Jan 8 ... The latest sunrises of the year - 7:13 A.M.

Dec. 31 ... New Year's Eve - The Staff wishes everyone a Happy New Year.



FOOTNOTES TO NATURE

by MARY JEAN DEWIRE

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly"



Decorating with evergreens during the midwinter season is a custom centuries old. Many kinds of greens are used including laurel, ivy, rosemary, mistletoe, fir and pine boughs but the holly plant with its prickly green leaves and bright red berries has long been a favorite with people all over the world. Because of the popularity and widespread use of holly during the holiday season, several customs and legends have arisen in connection with the plant and I would like to tell you about some of them.

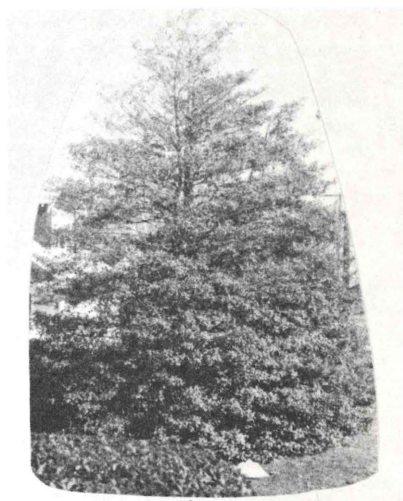
Over 500 years before the birth of the Christ Child - and the Christmas season - the ancient Romans celebrated a midwinter feast called Saturnalia. They used holly for decorating and also sent branches of it along with their gifts. To the Romans, holly was a symbol of friendliness and good will. The early peoples of Northern Europe used to hang holly on their doors to shelter the woodland spirits from the chilly winds and thus insure good luck in their homes. When the birds had eaten the holly berries, they thought these spirits had gone safely back to their homes in the woods.

Through the years people continued to use holly for decorative purposes and the author of a book on the 16th century noted that "everyman's house, parish church, and market places were decorated with holly at Christmas." In England, it was considered bad luck to bring this green-

ery into the house before Christmas Eve for fear that it would provoke family quarrels. There was also a belief that all the holiday greenery must be taken down on the Twelfth Night so that no bad luck would come to the home or family.

Holly also has some legends and superstitions that aren't related to Christmas. It is said that witches hated the plant, so people would group it around their homes to keep them away. Some people believed that holly repelled lightning. And other people used to make a syrup from the bark of this plant that was supposed to be a sure remedy for coughs.

This plant's name comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'holen'. It belongs to a large family of trees and shrubs, not all of which are evergreen. Sometimes holly is a tall tree while at other times it grows as a low shrub or even a hedge. Holly comes in many varieties and grows almost everywhere except in extremely cold places.



Perhaps the fact that holly and its berries were used so widely may have given the color scheme of red and green to the Christmas season.

REMINDER: On Sunday, Jan. 4th at 3:00 p.m. Dr. Roger Tony Peterson will present his Audubon Wildlife Film, "Galapogor — Wild Eden" at Palmer Auditorium —Conn College. Tickets are \$2.00 for adults and \$1.00 for students and will be available at the door.

ALONG THE SHORE

by BARBARA KASHANSKI



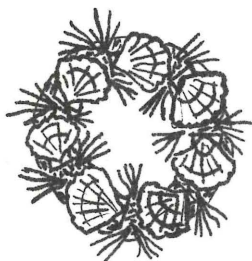
GIFTS FROM THE SHORE



This is the month when there is only one big thought in everyone's mind - Christmas. So instead of trying to make you think of something else, I will join you in thinking Christmas thoughts and pass on to you some fun ideas on gifts from the shore. Here are some ways to use up all those shells you've been collecting, either here or on other shores.

Live Near the Shore? - Make a Shell Wreath.

Materials: a styrofoam wreath base and Elmer's glue or bond cement, scallop and other shells, a green like spruce, white pine, or hemlock, and gold spray.



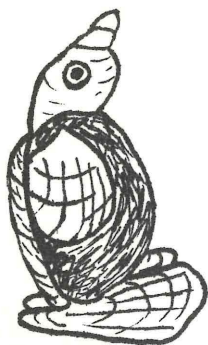
Directions: spray shells and base gold. Glue on scallop shells for main line. Fill in spaces with smaller shells if you want. Fill inside and outside of base with greens which can be dipped in glue and then stuck in holes made by an icepick or nails. For a fuller, thicker wreath add more layers of shells.

Shell Birds - Fun For Everyone

Materials: oval smooth stone from the beach. Mussell shells (ribbed rather than blue if you have them) for wings, tail, feet. Pointed periwinkle shell (head) quick drying glue, black seed or small button (eye), colored lacquer if you wish.



Directions: Glue on head, feet, then wings and tail. Have the wings and tail touching and glued touching for extra support. Glue on eye, lacquer if you want.



Penguin -- same materials except, if you have coquina shells, they are better for the wings.

Candy or Soap Dish

Materials: Any large flat shell. Quahog shells are the biggest we have here. Any very small shells you might have, bits of coral, pebbles, sea glass, glue or bond cement, pearlized lacquer (if you want).

Directions: Lacquer large shell if you want; glue smaller shells to top edge. Simple, but very pretty. Colored lacquer may be used on smaller shells if you want, but use light colors for best effect.



Have an Old Tired Wastebasket? Make It New!



How? - spray the basket with your favorite color inside and out, or paint it with an oil base paint, or cover it with burlap or any other strong, plain material. Get the glue and gather your treasures from the sea and decorate your wastebasket. Voila - a new basket and nice gift.

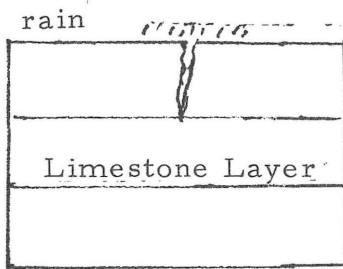
Have fun - use your imagination and your shells. If you don't have enough shells, take a trip to the beach. It's not too late!

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

ROCK HOUNDS

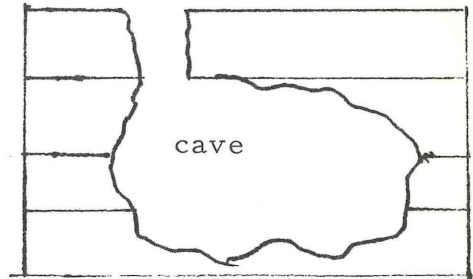
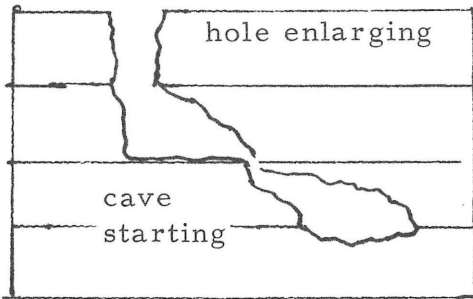
by JERRY THEILER

UNDERGROUND CAVES AND CAVERNS

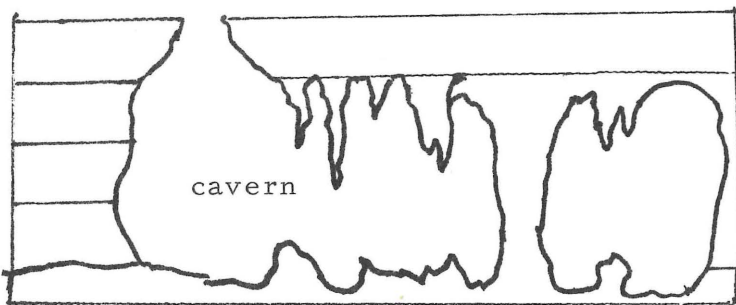


Limestone is composed mainly of the mineral calcite. Calcite dissolves in weak acids. As calcite dissolves, cracks and holes enlarge and may form caverns or caves.

Earth's surface

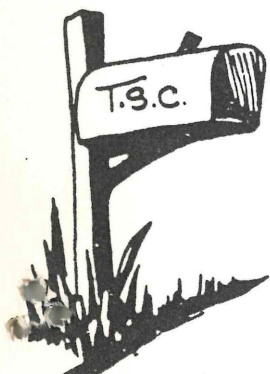


Rain dissolves some calcite forming weak carbonic acid. This dissolves more and enlarges natural cracks in limestone.



Dissolved calcite then drips from the ceiling of the cave to form stalactites and drops onto the cave floor to build up stalagmites. Pillars are formed when these two formations meet.

ARTICLES OF ADULT INTEREST

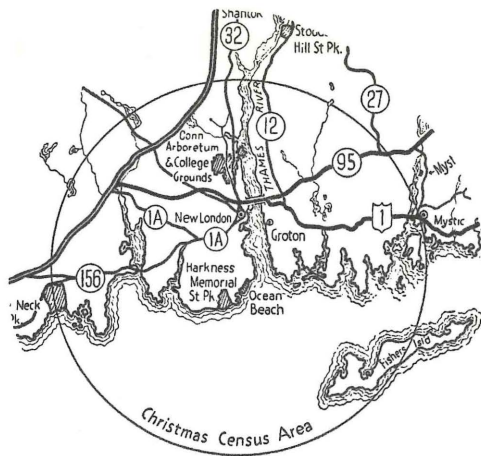


We welcome notice of Conservation activities or problems for inclusion in this section of the Naturalist's Notebook. . . . Please let us know of your local activity so that others may be aware of your efforts and lend their support where possible. . . .

A NEW ARRIVAL: Acting Executive Director Bob Dewire became a proud papa on October 30th when his wife gave birth to a 6 lb. 5 oz. baby girl. Both Mary Jean and the baby are fine. Her name is Kristen Jean.

GIFT MEMBERSHIPS: A gift membership in the Thames Science Center makes an excellent Christmas gift for a friend or relative. It is a gift remembered every month or when programs are participated in. Membership helps the Center grow and increase and improve its programs. If you know of someone who enjoys the world of Nature, a Science Center membership would be the ideal gift.

THE CENTER STORE has a number of items that would make nice gifts. A fine assortment of books with a Nature theme along with stationery, plaques, bird feeders, and other items. There are also ideal stocking stuffers for the budding rockhound. Remember there is a 10% discount to members on the purchase of \$1.00 or more. The store will be open from 1:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays during December.



NEW LONDON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT: The annual Christmas Bird Census sponsored by the National Audubon Society and locally by the Thames Science Center will be held this year on Saturday, December 27th. We want to get as many reports of birds from feeding stations as possible, so if you feed birds and live within the boundaries of the Count circle, (see map above), please report the species and the number of each species you see on Count day only. Count the largest number of each species of bird you see at any one time. This avoids counting the same bird twice. Make sure you are positive as to the identification of a bird before you report it. If you aren't sure, then remove it from your list. At the end of the day phone in your report to 443:6314. A full total of the count will be sent to you soon after. Last year we received reports from 25 feeding stations. This year we should be able to get 50 or more. The success of the count depends largely on your help. Let's make this the best count ever! (Last year - 106 species; 19,682 individuals).

LYME-SAYBROOK CHRISTMAS BIRD CENSUS: The Christmas Bird Census that covers the Lyme-Saybrook area with boundaries extending from the White Sands Beach in Lyme west to Hammonasset Beach and north to Gillette's Castle will be held on Monday, December 22nd. This Count is sponsored by the Conn. Audubon Council and those persons interested in making feeder reports should contact the Council at Orchard Hill Road, Harwinton, Conn. for further information.

Christmas Bird Count

by BOB DEWIRE

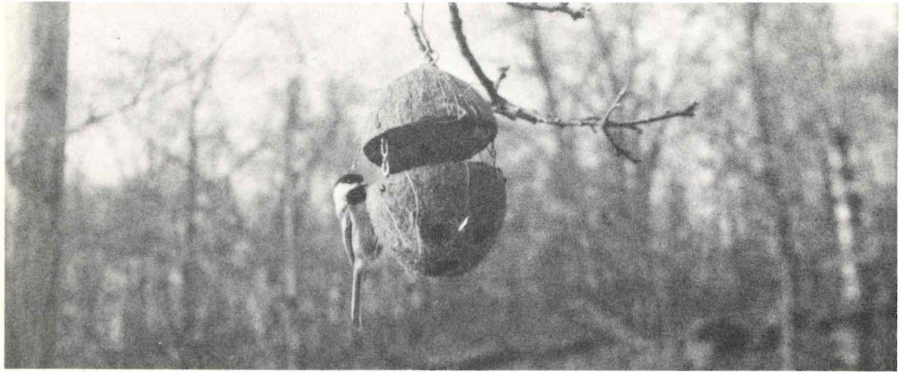


Photo by R. Dewire

FEEDER REPORTING

I was down with a bad cold one year at the time of the Christmas Count. I knew I would be unable to go out in the field as I usually did. Instead I faced, to me at least, a dull day of reporting the birds that came to the feeding station at my house. The thought of passing up the excitement of getting up before dawn to go into the woods to try to hear an owl or two calling, or to go to a marsh to clap and try to hear a rail answer the sound, or later in the day scan mudflats for shorebirds or the rivers and Sound for various ducks was rather disappointing for me. It seemed that it would surely be a boring day of counting chickadees, juncos and other common feeder birds. I was to be in for a surprise however.

The night before I had put out plenty of sunflower seed in the coconut and shelf feeders, scattered a lot of mix seed on the ground and made sure the suet feeder was full.

Next morning, I was up early. It was a gray 30-degree day. First arrivals were some blue jays and they were soon followed by chickadees, titmice, and white-

breasted nuthatches. There had been a red-breasted nuthatch at the feeder earlier in the week and I was hoping that he would arrive to spice up my list. A few ground feeders arrived about 8:30 A.M. Six juncos, 3 white-throated, 5 tree, and 2 song sparrows and 2 mourning doves. A downy woodpecker on the suet was chased off by two starlings. This was about all that I saw up to noon time - 11 species and about 36 individuals - not very encouraging.

At about 1:00 P.M. it began to snow - not too hard, but enough to cover the ground. I threw some mix seed on the snow and then watched in amazement as birds came from everywhere to feed. A pair of cardinals arrived first, eating the sunflower seeds out of the mix. A towhee and fox sparrow joined them - birds I hadn't seen at the station in weeks! Purple finches and goldfinches began to fight for control of the coconut and shelf feeders. A hairy woodpecker and two downies vied for the suet. Individual numbers of the birds jumped way up. Now there were 14 juncos, 8 white-throats, 10 tree and 3 song sparrows. A small brown bird climbed up the trunk of the nearest tree - a brown creeper. The activity at the feeders brought other birds--a brown thrasher and two field sparrows along with several unpopular English sparrows. Suddenly, in the midst of all this, barely 6 inches from my nose, the little red-breasted nuthatch hopped onto the shelf feeder, checked over several sunflower seeds before finding one to his liking, and then flew off.

This mayhem continued all afternoon, although the snow stopped falling by 2:30 and less than an inch was on the ground. I was so busy counting birds to see if I could get new individual highs for species that I didn't notice that darkness was setting in. I totaled up and found that I had 22 species and 92 individuals. I phoned in my report feeling very proud of my station. I also decided that it wasn't such a bad day after all and that feeder watching could be very rewarding.

What's To Be Done About The Ecology Crisis?

by MIKE WALKER

This past Halloween, a group of concerned scientists, educators and students sat down together and talked about the environmental problems facing spaceship Earth. Discussions continued well into the night and resumed during a series of seminars and lectures on Saturday and Sunday. The occasion was a weekend-long conference sponsored by the New England Committee for Non-violent Action and entitled "What's to be done about the Ecology Crisis?" As the title suggests, the tone was positive. Although the problems outlined by the speakers boggle the mind, the consensus was that even if some of them are not now solvable, all are attackable.

Speakers included scientists from Bennington College, Southeastern Massachusetts University and Woods Hole, officials from professional environmental protection organizations, leaders in community ecology action groups, and graduate students from a number of eastern schools.

The opening session Friday night was grim. The panel discussion was billed as "An Over-all Look at the Ecology Crisis," and the descriptions of the enormous environmental crises facing us were more frightening than any Halloween spectre. Eminent scientists predict widespread global famine by 1975, with resultant social and economic upheaval. The world's population soars, air and water pollution are barely acknowledged, and we continue to strip the earth of green plants and fill in oxygen and food producing marshland, despite proof that such ravaging is helping to adversely alter the earth's atmosphere. And over us all, wherever we may be on earth, floats a high, thin layer of poisonous lead particles, courtesy of the internal combustion engine. We left the meeting angered and subdued.

On Saturday morning, we heard Dr. Irving Lyon, Prof. of Biology at Bennington College, and Mr. Larry Bogart, Director of the Anti-Pollution League and the Citizens' Committee For Protection of the Environment, argue that presently developed nuclear power plants are neither safe nor economical. They maintained that there is no such thing as a "safe" or "tolerable" level of radiation for humans. They pointed out that with present and projected plants in operation millions of people will be exposed to radiation, the long term effects of which have not been adequately determined.

On Saturday afternoon, Dr. Diane Hitchcock, a research biologist at Hamilton Standard, explained why she felt the earth was doomed no matter what efforts are made in its behalf now. The success of a process called the energy cycle depends upon a delicate balance between solar radiation, the utilization of the sun's energy by green plants, the transmission of that energy to the other living things on earth, and the type and availability of waste products for recycling. Dr. Hitchcock believes that man has affected this system enormously - and mortally.

Saturday evening's discussion of what individuals and groups can do and are doing resulted in an impressive list of accomplishments and positive possibilities.

Concerned citizens in Vermont have obtained an injunction halting work on a nuclear power plant. The development of fusion-type rather than fission type nuclear power may well offer a safe alternative. Some of our Washington legislators are deeply dismayed by present conditions and have been and are instrumental in initiating earth healing legislation. They need our support. Local ecology action groups are organizing and working all over the country. Dr. Lyon made the most important point of the summation. "You start with a small, modest goal within the community and you build on that."

The vital thing is that people inform themselves and do something - now.

FIELD NOTES

OCTOBER 15 - NOVEMBER 15

Saybrook, Lyme, and East Lyme: At South Cove, Saybrook, there were about 15 RUDDY DUCKS present on Oct. 19th along with about 40 very late FORSTER'S TERNS which remained up to Oct. 28th. An adult RED-HEADED WOODPECKER was seen on the main street of Saybrook on Oct. 20th, and a young one was seen on the 29th. In Lyme, an immature BALD EAGLE has been at Lord's Cove through October and a BROWN-CAPPED CHICKADEE was reported. A very late RED-EYED VIREO was feeding on berries behind the Yankee Pedlar Gift Shop in Lyme on Nov. 1st. At Rocky Neck there were well over 100 PINTAILS and GREEN-WINGED TEAL on Oct. 18th. The Science Center field trip there on Nov. 8th produced a flock of 25 SNOW BUNTING and 8 WATER PIPITS in the parking lot and a flock of a dozen RED CROSSBILLS which indicates that the winter finches may be coming down again this year. In the fields around Bride Lake up to 400 CANADA GEESE and 3 SNOW GEESE are present.

Waterford and New London: Late staying warblers included a NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH at Mary Butler Dr. on Oct. 18th, a NASHVILLE WARBLER at Bate's Woods on the 23rd, and a BLACK & WHITE WARBLER at Waterford Beach on Nov. 12th. HERMIT THRUSHES appeared in numbers through the region the last week of October and first week of November. Four were feeding on a lawn at Mary Butler Dr. Land birds newly arriving included FOX SPARROWS at the Center on Oct. 19th and two PURPLE FINCHES at the feeders on the 25th. Fourteen PINE SISKENS were at Mary Butler Dr. on Oct. 18th and 5 EVENING GROSBEAKS flew over there on Nov. 1st - further evidence that the finches are coming. Along the shore, a very late WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER was at Waterford Beach on Nov. 12th. HOODED MERGANSERS arrived at Golden Spur on Oct. 30th and 2 OLDSQUAWS

were in Jordan Cove on Nov. 1st. At Harkness Memorial Park the first BUFFLEHEAD was seen in the inlet on Oct. 18th, as were 4 PINTAILS. A COMMON SNIFE was in a wet field there on Oct. 26th and a WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW was still there on Nov. 1st.

Groton, Mystic and Stonington: SPRING PEEPERS were still calling at the Peace Sanctuary on Nov. 12th. A very late BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER was there on Oct. 25th. DICKCISSELS have been reported at feeders in West Mystic, N. Stonington, and River Rd., Mystic. A small flock of EVENING GROSBEAKS were at West Mystic on Oct. 20th. BUFFLEHEADS were on the Mystic River Oct. 19th and HOODED MERGANSERS were in Bakers Cove on the 26th. Over 60 SNOW BUNTINGS were at Groton Long Point on Nov. 11th. On River Road in Mystic, 2 BROWN-CAPPED CHICKADEES were present from Oct. 19th to the 22nd, a VESPER SPARROW was there on the 21st, late CHIPPING SPARROWS were present Nov. 9th and the first TREE SPARROW arrived the same day.

Rhode Island Shoreline: The Science Center's Napatree Point field trip on Oct. 25th produced 4 SHORT-EARNED OWLS, a SHARP-SHINNED HAWK, 14 SNOW BUNTINGS, 5 OLDSQUAWS, 45 BRANT, many RED-THROATED LOONS, and at least 100 PINE SISKENS passing overhead in small flocks. Also reported at Napatree on Oct. 29th were a CORY'S SHEARWATER and several KNOTS. GANNETS were seen off Weekapaug Nov. 3rd and a WESTERN KINGBIRD was at Charlston on Nov. 7th.

Contributors to this column were: Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Bates, Grace Bissell, Lawrence Brooks, James Clark, Mrs. Philip Dewire, Bob and Mary Jean Dewire, Helen Gilman, Barbara Kashanski, Audrey King, Mrs. Charles King, Mary Laffargue, Margaret MacGregor, Bill Morgan, Paul Spitzer, Mr. & Mrs. Russell Waldo and Michael Walker.

ACTIVITIES FOR DECEMBER

December 6 - 10:00 - 12:00 A.M. A Junior Workshop for Members in Grades 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. "Making a Christmas Wreath". This special program is run for us by the New London Garden Club. Advance Registration required. Limit 15 members.

December 13 - All Day. An adult field trip to Cape Ann, Mass. to observe northern species of waterfowl. Phone the Center for details.

December 14 - 3:00 P.M. Family Film Festival. Held at Lyman Allyn Museum Auditorium. Film will be Walt Disney's Feature Length "Perri". Center members free Non-members 50¢ donation.

December 22 - Lyme-Saybrook Christmas Bird Count. See page 10 for details.

December 27 - New London Christmas Bird Count. See page 10 for details.

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NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

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MICHAEL WALKER—*Curator*

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ROBERT DEWIRE
Editor

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to its members best wishes
for a Happy Holiday Season.*